

Frontier Tibet: Patterns of Change in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands. Edited by Stéphane Gros. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019. 554 pp. € 109,00.

Book Review by Xiaobai Hu

Frontier Tibet is one of the newest additions to Amsterdam University Press's Asian Borderlands Series. Supported by the European Research Council-funded project "Territories, Communities, and Exchanges in the Sino-Tibetan Kham Borderlands," this edited volume presents cutting-edge scholarship in the field of Kham studies and can be understood as a follow up to the project's previous publications, such as the *Cross-Currents* special issue, "Frontier Tibet: Trade and Boundaries of Authority in Kham."¹ Stéphane Gros, the editor of *Frontier Tibet*, states that the publication's goal is to foster an "understanding of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands in their historical, geographical, and multi-ethnic complexities, and in a relational sense of boundaries of identity re-construction between neighboring Tibetans and Chinese" (9).

The fourteen articles in *Frontier Tibet* are categorized into three groups. Part One—"Borders Inside Out"—includes three pieces that challenge the trend of naturalizing Kham as a spatial, cultural, or geopolitical unit. Instead of continuing to situate Kham in binaries such as core/periphery and Sino/Tibetan, Stéphane Gros's "Frontier (of) Experience" proposes a focus on Kham's relative location and multifaceted internal composition. The author uses the metaphor of the Möbius strip and its two-sidedness to suggest that a topological perspective best captures the malleability of Kham, of which the geopolitical dynamics, social constructs, and cultural characteristics are constantly produced in a relational manner. Revisiting existing frameworks, Katie Buffetrille further questions the scholarly tradition of identifying Kham and Amdo as "Tibetan Borderlands." Drawing examples from the revitalization of Buddhism, participation in politics, and cultural revival in Kham, Buffetrille claims that what we see in contemporary Kham and Amdo is "a process whose dynamics no longer radiate from the center to the periphery but, on the contrary, from the periphery to the center" (87). The third piece in this section is a case study that examines the tension between the physical and conceptual boundaries of Gyelthang in southern Kham. Author Eric Morgan takes an ontological approach to scrutinize how the locals conceptualize Gyelthang in relation to Kham, eastern Tibet, and the Tibetan world in general, arguing that for locals Gyelthang is primarily

¹ "Frontier Tibet: Trade and Boundaries of Authority in Kham," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, Issue.19, 2016.

an idea of place that is vague in definition and meaning while its physical territory is of less importance.

Part Two—“Modes of Expansion and Forms of Control”—contains five articles concerning how different social groups adopt various modes of expansion to achieve, maintain, and consolidate on-the-ground authority in Kham. John Bray’s piece focuses on the operations of the Missions Étrangères de Paris in late 19th and early 20th century Kham. According to Bray, on the one hand, the missionaries were outsiders who took advantage of the Qing and Lhasa authorities’ fear of Europeans’ power to infiltrate the regional trade networks; but on the other hand, they also secured the livelihood of their local followers and thus gradually integrated into the fabric of local society. Patterson Giersch also frames commercial activities in Kham in a transnational context. He argues that the establishment of powerful trade institutions introduced Kham’s highland products to the booming global market, and it was the unstable geopolitical situation of the region in the early 20th century that allowed space for new commercial entities to rise and, ultimately, disempower local non-Han communities, creating economic inequality across ethnic lines.

The other three pieces in Part Two shed light on the role agriculture played in 20th century Kham. Scott Relyea’s article examines how the early 20th century Chinese authorities used settler farmers to extend state control to the borderland regions. Providing detailed accounts of how the Sichuanese farmers settled down in an unfamiliar environment, Relyea situates the borderland settlement project in the empire-to-nation-state transition, during which a global trend of linking territory claims with assertions of sovereignty emerged. Similarly focused on connections between agriculture and the nation-state, Mark Frank’s “Wheat Dreams” locates the Chinese state’s agricultural expansion in a different context in which food was closely associated with nationalism. By investigating two scientific endeavors of Republican China’s Bureau of Agricultural Improvement in Kham from 1937 to 1949, Frank argues that experiments using wheat and a sedentary mode of yak production to replace highland barley and nomadic yak production were both conducted in light of the state’s discourse on improvement in which wheat and sedentism were seen as more positive indicators of national strength than barley and nomadism. Gillian Tan extends the discussion on the agriculture-pastoralism binary into the post-1949 context. She claims that the binary was created by the state with the goal of characterizing sedentism as superior and civilized. Yet in practice, the ideal types based on the opposition between *mumin* (牧民) and *nongmin* (农民) became quite vague as animal husbandry in eastern Kham was often combined with a wide array of activities, including agriculture. The article thus joins Relyea and Frank in pointing out the modernist

ideology associated with the promotion of agriculture in 20th century China's Kham borderland.

The third section—"Strategic Belongings"—shifts attention to the on-the-ground repercussions of various modes of expansion in Kham. Four of the six articles in this section center on individual figures to highlight their agency in shifting geopolitical dynamics. In the first piece, Lucia Galli focuses on Khatag Dzamyag, a merchant who wrote a travel journal documenting the tumult of mid-20th century Kham. Following the journal's detailed accounts, Galli traces how the economic interests of Khampa merchants intertwined with local religious and political powers and eventually contributed to the emergence of a proto-identitarian awareness among the Khampas. Fabienne Jagou relies on Academia Sinica's archives to reveal how the Trokyap king responded to the dispute between Sichuan and Xikang over his kingdom's territory. Taking pragmatic concerns such as taxes and corvée labor into consideration and ignoring relatively abstract ideas such as nationalism and ethnic equality, the Trokyap king was able to influence the Republican government's decision on border demarcation. Yudru Tsomu examines the rise of Jagö Topden, a political strongman in early 20th century Dergé. Unlike traditional Kham rulers such as Gönpö Namgyel who benefited from Kham's distance from powerful political and religious centers, Jagö Topden and other open-minded Khampa elites acquired legitimacy and authority not from hereditary status, but from their savvy participation in regional geopolitics and ability to keep up with the times as modern and progressive rulers. Paying attention to another capable figurehead, Dáša Pejchar Mortensen studies the colorful life experiences of Wangchuk Tempa as a monk, bandit, anti-Communist rebel, and eventually a party official in the 1950s. The author argues that by studying powerful individuals like Wangchuk Tempa, who was able to transform outside powers into local authority, we can revisit concepts such as collaboration and complicate the notion of the "Chinese state" in rural ethnic minority areas.

The other two articles in this section revolve around place-making. Maria Turek's work on kingship construction among Yushu Tibetans since 1951 provides a good example of the tension between official and local history writing. Although the Nangchen kings wielded little political authority historically, contemporary Nangchen historians deliberately highlight the kings' power and hegemony in order to promote the consolidation of local identity which, in turn, helps justify the claim for regional autonomy. In her article "Yachen as Process," Yasmin Cho focuses on female Buddhist practitioners. The author investigates the encampment of Yachen Gar to understand how nuns across Kham relied on architectural freedom and material maneuverability to shape their Buddhist space when faced with an

unstable political environment. The collection concludes with Carole McGranahan's discussion of Chinese settler colonialism in contemporary Tibet. Claiming that questions about frontiers, empire, and sovereignty are keys to understand Kham, McGranahan proposes treating Communist China as an empire and thus conceptualizing its relationship with Kham in a colonial context. Drawing on observations of recent events and changes in Kham, the author comments that peripheral people "have created new practices to re-center what has been lost" (529).

Taken together, the articles in this collection indicate three trends in Kham studies. The first is glocalization. The contributors tend to situate historical events in Kham in a trans-national context and hence mapping local history onto global events. John Bray's piece demonstrates how European colonial powers infiltrated the deep mountains of Kham and even reshaped local social structures, the religious landscape, and inter-community relationships. Patterson Giersch and Lucia Galli's articles chart the process of how traders and trade institutions took advantage of shifting geopolitics in South and Southeast Asia to build trans-national links that knitted Kham into a worldwide commercial network. While previous paradigms mainly show how China got access to the global market via coastal areas, especially the treaty ports, this volume reminds us of the importance of the overlooked western China-South Asian channel. In this regard, Kham is not only a Sino-Tibetan contact zone, but also a nexus of cross-continental competition. The idea of treating Kham as a contentious zone for global power dynamics is also shown in the "Chronology of Major Events" section of the book, in which Kham history is juxtaposed with events of global significance.

The second trend highlighted in this volume is the comparative potential of Kham studies. Many themes discussed in *Frontier Tibet* are key issues across the discipline, and Kham's ethnic, religious, and environmental characteristics can provide insights and promote dialogue beyond Kham studies. For example, several pieces in the volume consider borderland agricultural development, but Kham was not the only region during the late Qing where the empire promoted settler migration for wasteland reclamation and land usage conversion. To what extent was the situation in Kham different from Mongolia, Manchuria, or Taiwan? Did the empire modify imperial policies because of Kham's ethnic features, inhospitable climate, and rich religious atmosphere? Comparing various local ramifications could deepen our understandings of the Qing's imperial expansion and borderland governmentality. Moreover, Mark Frank's piece points out that many foreign agricultural specialists, especially those from Japan, were invited to Kham to oversee borderland productivity improvement. Considering the fact that Japan was dispatching many

agricultural technicians to Hokkaido for natural resource exploitation at the same time, the cross-regional connections could even open up possibilities for comparative studies in the history of science.

The third trend I see in this volume is that the level of scholarly engagement with the discipline of frontier studies is deeper than ever before. This development is exemplified by Stéphane Gros' theoretical discussion aimed at promoting "Kham" to a Zomia-like paradigm. Claiming that existing notions such as 'middle ground' and 'matrix' are not sufficient to explain the particularities of Kham and that it should be understood as a *process* but not a *place*, Gros identifies Kham as having a topological character "in which [it] appears neither simply distant nor proximate and neither outside nor inside" (41). This approach, in which categories in the frontier are, by nature, relational—featuring relativity and interchangeability—allows us to understand frontier regions from a different perspective by rendering externally imposed binaries such as core/periphery, collaboration/resistance, and Sino/Tibetan meaningless in the context of the frontier. In this regard, "Kham" as process could indeed encourage frontier scholars to perceive frontier social relations and power dynamics from a different dimension as "we are faced with the shaping of a topology of belonging whereby the *merging* between the internal and the external creates possibilities for *emerging* social forms and events" (70).

To nitpick, scholars who are interested in pre-modern Kham history may not be satisfied with the chronological scope of the volume. Nearly all of the pieces are about post-19th century Kham, while events that happened prior are, at best, mentioned as historical background. Understandably, this is due to the scholars' personal research interests as well as the limited availability of source materials, but pre-modern Kham history could in fact further complicate the picture. In terms of the trans-regionality of Kham, the Mongols in 17th century Kham played important roles in establishing the power dynamics that, to a great extent, contributed to the region's complex ethnic composition. In a similar regard, the religious competition between Bönpo followers and Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, as well as among various Tibetan Buddhist schools, since the 15th century are also worthy of our attention as such internal diversity not only laid the foundation for the region's religious landscape but also pushes us to further grapple with Kham's heterogeneity. Adding more historical dimensions to the picture could help to answer what exactly Kham, as an analytical unit, encompasses.

Frontier Tibet: Patterns of Change in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands is certain to be a captivating read for scholars of Kham history. Those who are interested in Amdo as well as other Tibetan peripheries are

also likely to be inspired by the various modes of expansion and bottom-up approaches. I would further recommend the theoretical pieces in the volume for inclusion in any syllabus on frontier studies. *Frontier Tibet* is positioned to become a model for the field, and I look forward to seeing what this scholarly community produces in the future.